AUFORA Journal SUMMER 1995

Editorial: Extraterrestrial Viruses

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Homo sapiens: forty-thousand-year-old Earth species, conqueror of its natural habitat, conqueror of any environment, conqueror of continents, conqueror of seas and oceans, conqueror of Gaia herself.

What next?

People of all cultures have looked to the stars for millennia (the obvious choice- the final frontier). Previously, we have reached to the heavenly light houses with futility for these were not Earthly things, this was knowledge that was not to belong in the hands of mere mortals (bearing in mind the Tower of Babel), like travelling to the edge of the World and looking down. The stars, like the horizon, seemed infinitely distant. Yet, in 1492, Columbus conquered the latter, and mankind is on the threshold of conquering the former.

Yet crossing this threshold could be as disastrous as it is rewarding. Disastrous not in terms of assimilation (humanization or alienization) or interplanetary war, but disastrous in that an extraterrestrial virus could wipe us or them completely off the face of the Universe - xenocide. No second chances here. Humanity must be cautious in its endeavor to reach the stars, for a deadly virus is as primitive as life itself and is surely to exist if any other life-form does, yet it is as dangerous and weapons bread of the highest technology.

Because it is conceivable (and believed by many) that aliens are already here (monitoring us, abducting us, impregnating us, cross-breeding us) it is from this perspective that we shall look at a viral threat first. Just as Columbus spread European viruses to the "Indians" that Europeans had long since been immune to; the "Greys", "Pleiadians", whoever, may spread an extraterrestrial virus to us. If this is truly the scenario we must face, then we have no defence except fluke immunity that may keep a small percentage of us alive. Isolated on our tiny planet, we have nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. However, one may be reassured that this is unlikely by our knowledge, atleast an intentional infection would be unlikely. If we are correct in our assumptions of their intentions, humans are needed alive.

The greatest threat from extraterrestrial viruses would be a product of our travelling to other planets and finding life. This time we are Columbus and his men, and the things we meet on this planet are the natives oblivious to the danger we may represent. On top of human kind's uncontrollable instinct to claim everything for ourselves regardless of who it hurts, a virus (perhaps even the common cold) could wipe a planet clean of a species or two or more. Imagine humanity's despair if an intelligent life-form species, that we had just begun to communicate with and understand, was murdered to extinction in this way. What would they think as their people are killed gruesomely by something they don't understand? Something that we brought. What do we do to avoid this? What is the best possible way that we could test if any of the common viruses lying dormant in our flesh would kill these new found beings? Ironically, we would abduct them, we would perform medical experiments on them, and so that they would not yet be aware of our presence, we would erase their memories of the incident (if we have such technology in the future).

Unfortunately, the worst case scenario is yet to come, atleast from humanity's own self-centred point of view. We may discover a planet that has the appropriate melange of gases in the atmosphere, suitable gravitational pull, and similar flora and fauna to Earth. The ideal planet. Perhaps it even has intelligent life with whom we can co-exist. Thus does mankind colonize unknown territory for the first time in one, maybe several centuries since we colonized the last possible land mass on Earth. But this time we are the victims of a virus. A virus that could probably has no effect on the planet's native animals or atleast has not the strength to kill. Humans, on the other hand, might be prime targets - bags of innocent flesh that the virus will devour and liquefy like ice

on a frying pan. It is possible that the virus has already killed all the life on the planet that is not an effective host. Therefore, the virus would live in all living creatures on the planet. The planet itself is essentially a host. Once a human sets foot on the planet, he/she would be surrounded instantly by the virus. A cut of any kind might be as fatal as an easy front entrance to a human's delicious flesh. We could not eat anything that lives on the planet because it no doubt carries the virus. If the virus is airborne, it will stick to the lungs and kill you from there. Then what do we do? Stay on the planet and watch our bodies melt beneath our eyes? Or perhaps the intelligent choice would be to return to the ship and head home to Earth...and infect the entire human race - humanity's suicide? But, let's say, for the sake of argument that we learn to control the virus to some extent. With our futuristic knowledge of medicine we can then slow the speed at which the virus kills. Make it something like HIV, equally fatal but slow in killing. Then we could return to Earth, assuming those fifty-billion people still living on our planet are going to let us bring back a deadly virus that kills everything albeit slowly. Unlikely to say the least. So the Earth governing body says NO! These colonists cannot leave the new planet because it might spark the extinction of humanity, and the colonists are left to watch their own bodies melt beneath their eyes anyway.

So the sign that must mark the path of Homo sapiens' trek into space is "PROCEED WITH CAUTION". If the viral threat takes the form of human infecting alien then we do what we can to get a specimen. In other words, we abduct one of them, put them in a cage, infect them with any viruses that we may carry and see what happens. We might be able to vaccinate them. It seems cruel but it is for their well-being, and it's done every day in laboratories all over the World with monkeys. If the viral threat takes the from of alien infecting human, we must again test on a specimen. Because we could not possibly sacrifice another human (Heaven forbid! It's only okay to sacrifice other creatures) we abduct a monkey from its home in a rainforest and we put it in a cage and we expose the monkey to any virus that the newly discovered planet or alien race might host, and again, see what happens. This is the only way that we can ensure that neither human nor alien race is entirely destroyed by a virus and hopefully our forty-thousand-year-old species will survive its exploration of the final frontier.

table of contents

AUFORA's page

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